

Name _____



came to realize that he himself would eventually die, too. That thought terrified him! Panicked, Gilgamesh decided that he had to pay a visit to a man named Utnapishtim. He once heard that Utnapishtim and his wife were the only humans to whom the gods had ever granted eternal life.

To find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh had to travel through dangerous grounds. But he did not care. Along the way, he met many who tried to dissuade him. Being stubborn, he cast their warnings aside and pressed on. After crossing the Waters of Death (with the help of a ferryman named Urshanabi), he finally faced Utnapishtim in person.

Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh how he became immortal.

Utnapishtim was once the king of Shuruppak. At the time, the gods were angry at mankind. They made a secret oath that they would destroy the world with a flood. One of the gods, Ea, wanted to alert Utnapishtim. But because of the oath, he could not tell him directly. So he whispered to the wall of Utnapishtim's house. Through it, the king learned of the looming flood. He followed Ea's advice and built a giant boat, big enough to load a pair of every animal on Earth. When the disaster struck, Utnapishtim, his wife, and the animals hid inside the boat. The Great Flood continued for seven days and seven nights. When it finally ended, the entire Earth had become a huge ocean. Utnapishtim and his companions were the only survivors. When the gods found out what had happened, they were very angry at Ea. But they eventually relented. Instead of making the couple die, they granted them eternal life.

At this point, Utnapishtim offered Gilgamesh a chance to be immortal. If Gilgamesh could stay awake for 6 days and 7 nights, he, too, could live on forever! Gilgamesh said he could do it. But as soon as he sat down, he fell asleep. Utnapishtim knew that Gilgamesh might deny falling asleep. So he asked his wife to bake a loaf of bread everyday and placed it next to him. By the seventh day, he woke Gilgamesh up. He pointed at the loaves and showed him their states of decay. Seeing how moldy and stale the first few loaves were, Gilgamesh fell silent. The evidence was strong. He had slept so soundly that he did not even know there were loaves of bread next to him! Luckily, Utnapishtim's wife took pity on him. She convinced her husband to tell Gilgamesh about a secret plant at the bottom of the

ocean. Whoever ate it could become young again. Upon hearing it, Gilgamesh tied stones to his feet and sank to the bottom of the ocean. He plucked the plant and brought it back to the surface. But Gilgamesh did not eat the plant right away. He wanted to go back home and test it on some elders first. Before he left, he invited Urshanabi to visit his kingdom. The ferryman agreed. They sailed across the Waters of Death and headed toward Uruk. On the way home, Gilgamesh saw a spring and jumped in to take a bath. While he was having a grand time playing in the water, a snake smelled the plant and stole it. By the time Gilgamesh realized what had happened, it was already too late!

Now almost home, Gilgamesh asked Urshanabi to take a good look at Uruk. He urged the ferryman to check out the mighty walls and the sturdy foundations. As he stood admiring his own kingdom, Gilgamesh realized that searching for eternal life was useless. The only way for men to be immortal is to cultivate a great civilization. On that front, he was successful!

The Epic of Gilgamesh was the oldest tale ever told. Its first version probably came around during the 3rd dynasty of Ur (2100 B.C. - 2004 B.C.) Over time, the storyline changed a bit. But the main characters remained the same. By far, the most complete version was preserved on twelve clay tablets in the library of Ashurbanipal. (The last clay tablet was more or less like an appendix. It did not really flow with the rest of the story.) Ashurbanipal was a famous Assyrian king. He ruled the Neo-Assyrian Empire from 668 B.C. to 627 B.C.

For many years, scholars thought the Epic of Gilgamesh was a made-up story. But they are not so sure now. Historical evidence showed that there was an Uruk king named Gilgamesh. According to the Sumerian King List, Gilgamesh was the fifth king of the 1st dynasty of Uruk. To make the whole thing even more interesting, the Great Flood, told by Utnapishtim, was strikingly similar to a famous biblical tale -- the Noah's Ark. Were the two stories connected? Did they describe the same horrific event? Well, that might be, but we would never know!